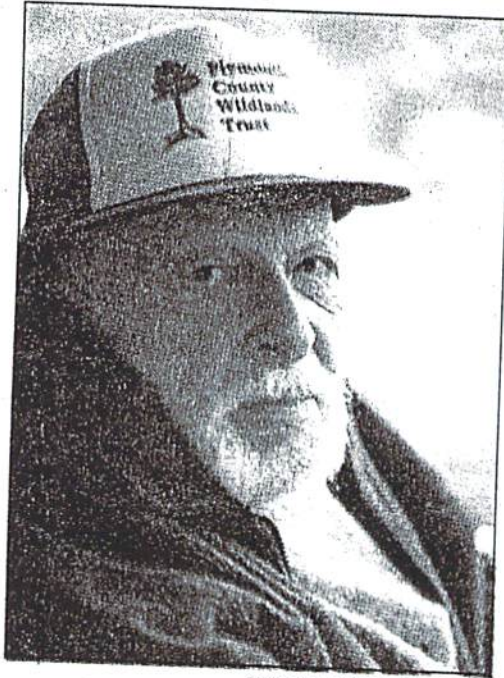


25 years of preserving special places



GLOBE STAFF PHOTO / FRANK O'BRIEN

Kathleen S. "Betty" Peterson of Middleborough was the first president of the Plymouth County Wildlands Trust, founded in 1973.



GLOBE STAFF PHOTO / TOM LANDERS

LeBaron R. Briggs of Plymouth is a major land benefactor of the Wildlands Trust.

Wildlands Trust has broader reach, same goals

By Jeff McLaughlin
GLOBE STAFF

DUXBURY – It started as a limited-scope operation run on a shoestring by a handful of unpaid volunteers who met on weekends in borrowed offices at the Plymouth County Airport.

Now it's a fast-growing and influential regional organization with nearly 1,500 dues-paying members and a small but highly regarded professional staff that works out of a renovated barn in Duxbury donated by a longtime supporter.

The nonprofit Wildlands Trust of Southeastern Massachusetts has come a long way in 25 years. It will celebrate that anniversary on Saturday at its annual meeting on the Cushman Preserve overlooking the Bluefish River in Duxbury.

Founded in 1973 as the Plymouth County Wildlands Trust, it changed its name two years

ago to reflect its wider horizons – which now include Bristol, Barnstable, and Norfolk counties as well as Plymouth County.

But its mission has remained constant: to preserve some of the special places that help define the landscape of this part of the state.

"It's heart-wrenching to see some of the beautiful places lost," said Leona Asker, of the Manomet section of Plymouth, who founded the trust with her sister, Phyllis Buck, also of Plymouth.

"Plus when all the development comes, and more and more town services are needed," she said last week, "taxes go up and up, and it's not just the environment that's lost. People on low and fixed-income can't stay on their land. That's just not right, and that's a very important reason for the Wildlands Trust to go on."

From its first property of 116 acres – two not-quite-abutting parcels east of Long Pond in the town of Plymouth, donated by the Emery family in 1973 – the trust's holdings have

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grown to nearly 2,500 acres provided by over 130 land donors and located in 17 towns.

This acreage translates into 70 permanently protected nature preserves, most open free to the public, that together provide a representative array of most of the region's land types, including kettle pond shores, glacial uplands, pine barrens, farmlands, woodlots, and a Native American encampment site.

Asker said that she had decided even then, in 1973, that mounting development pressures were threatening the character of her town. Plymouth had a population of about 15,000 when she settled in Manomet in the 1960s. The 1970s saw the beginning of the rapid spiral to today's total of nearly 55,000 people.

She had read an article about the activities of the Essex County Greenbelt Alliance on the North Shore — the first such countywide organization in eastern Massachusetts — and decided to see what could be done to set up a similar land trust in Plymouth County.

Asker was the clerk of the Board of Selectmen in Plymouth, "and so I knew quite a lot of people who might be interested," she said. She invited John W. "Jack" Peirce, founder of the Essex County group, to meet with her and a core group who liked the idea of a Plymouth County trust. Peirce was, and is, a resident of Topsfield, but he and his wife also had a summer house and land holdings in Wareham, and from the first he gave good organizational advice and also became an enthusiastic member of the Plymouth County group.

FYI

The 25th anniversary annual meeting of the Wildlands Trust of Southeastern Massachusetts will be held on Saturday from 11:30 a.m. to 1 p.m. at "The Anchorage," the 152-year-old house that is the centerpiece of the Capt. David Cushman Jr. Preserve, Anchorage Lane, off St. George Street (Route 14), Duxbury.

A highlight of the meeting will be the presentation of the first LeBaron Briggs Conservation Leadership Award to State Environmental Affairs Secretary Trudy Cox, for her efforts on behalf of land conservation in southeastern Massachusetts, and Herb and Paulie Emilson of Marshfield, major benefactors of the Wildlands Trust.

Then, from 1 to 3 p.m., the trust's executive director, Mark Primack, will guide visitors around the 27-acre property, part of Pilgrim John Alden's homestead, that overlooks the tidal Bluefish River. The land is a birdwatcher's delight.

The public is invited to ei-

ther or both events.

The Cushman Preserve, given to the trust by Alden descendant Lura Oakes Cushman in 1985, is named after her grandfather, a clipper ship captain who was active in the China and South Seas trade between 1840 and 1860. She retained a life tenancy at "The Anchorage" after her 1985 donation, but after her death in the early '90s, most of the contents were auctioned, as was her wish, to benefit the trust.

"It took an entire summer to catalog the stuff," recalled attorney William Abbott. "It was an extraordinary collection of art and artifacts, including what are called China Treaty Port paintings that are in tremendous demand by collectors." The auction brought in more than \$350,000 and helped transform the trust from a virtually all-volunteer organization to the enterprising, professionally-led enterprise it is today.

JEFF McLAUGHLIN

Asker enlisted town counsel Robert Shea to help draw up incorporation papers and do all the other necessary legal work pro bono. Within a few years, attorney William Abbott of Plymouth, whose practice is in Boston, succeeded Shea and also has donated his work. Meanwhile Asker and sister Phyllis won the enthusiastic support of the head of the new Manomet Bird Observatory, Kathleen S. "Betty" Peterson, for whom Phyllis had worked as secretary. Peterson became the group's first president.

"It was an all-volunteer effort," said Asker. "And it was just six or eight people at first. But it has really grown."

Peterson, like many of the other early members, has remained active in its affairs and is pleased that it is picking up pace even as the latest construction boom is going great guns south of Boston.

"The trust is maturing and evolving," said Peterson, who lives on a historic 100-acre farm in Middleborough and has donated some of the land to the trust. "It's been fortunate timing: As the development boom really began to threaten the character of the region, the trust got bigger and better equipped to deal with the issues."

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"In the beginning," Peterson recalled, "we had no office, no telephone, everything was done on weekends by people who already had busy lives. Now we're gaining visibility throughout the region, and as the boom takes hold, people feel a sense of urgency and are looking to us for leadership. The trust is really rolling now and it's exciting."

The flora, fauna, and geological

of land as well. As a consequence, Halfway Pond, headwaters of the Agawam River, is assured of remaining largely undisturbed forever, a legacy to generations yet to come.

But Briggs's involvement has not been limited to donations or to land he's known intimately all his life. His passion is for the entire landscape of the region. He and fellow longtime board member Reed Stewart of

'A recent study of land-use in this region showed a startling fact. More land has been developed, changed forever, in the past 40 years, than in all the previous 350 years.'

MARK PRIMACK, *Wildlands Trust executive director*

features of many of the properties are sketched in a trust guidebook, "Lands in Trust," which was published largely because of the efforts of LeBaron R. Briggs, a keen naturalist from his childhood days growing up in a rustic bungalow on the shore of Halfway Pond in Plymouth - the house he and his wife, Ruth, live in now in retirement.

Briggs is another stalwart of the trust's history. He joined soon after it was founded and remains active. Briggs and his family have donated several hundred acres around Halfway Pond to the Wildlands Trust and encouraged other pondfront landowners to make significant gifts

Marshfield have worked hard for years with other volunteers to maintain the ever-growing number of properties.

Unlike larger, long-established conservation organizations such as the Trustees of Reservations and the Massachusetts Audubon Society, the Wildlands Trust does not require that a gift of land be accompanied by a cash endowment to maintain the property. In the early years, as land donations trickled in, maintenance was manageable, thanks to the dedication of Briggs and other volunteers.

But in the 1990s, as the trust's holdings have increased rapidly in

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number and geographical spread, proper stewardship of the land has become a greater concern.

"We have a responsibility to our donors to preserve the land," said Jerry Ingersoll of Bourne, installed this spring as president of the trust. "Our 25th anniversary fund appeal to our members is for a \$250,000 Stewardship Fund." The income of the fund would help pay for a staff land steward to tour the properties, regularly and for trail maintenance, signs, and even contractor work where necessary.

But the ongoing boom south of Boston is gobbling up prime land at an ever-quickenning pace, making the trust's mission more urgent than ever, according to Ingersoll, an architect with a practice in Cambridge.

"I was thinking of giving [executive director] Mark Primack and the staff firefighter helmets as presents," said Ingersoll. "The region is hot.

Historically poor transportation networks spared southeastern Massachusetts from many of the excesses of suburban sprawl in decades past, but sprawl is now a real threat, Primack said.

"A recent study of land-use in this region showed a startling fact," he said. "More land has been developed, changed forever, in the past 40 years, than in all the previous 350 years."

Said Ingersoll, "There's a perception I think that a land trust is flat-out opposed to development. That's not so. It's not an either-or matter, rather a both-and proposition. In other words, can we find the ways to hold onto the unique qualities of our region even while development takes place? That's the challenge now.

"That makes education one of our emerging tasks - there are a lot of means, like conservation restrictions and agricultural restrictions and so forth, that are not widely understood south of Boston," Ingersoll said.

"There's less of a tradition of land-giving here than on the North Shore, for example, with its large estates and wealthy families. Here many of our largest landowners are farmers and cranberry growers and others who are rich in land but not in money. Most of them would like to stay on their land and not be forced to sell, but they don't know how to do that," he said.

Jack Peirce, guiding light in the early days, remains on the trust's advisory board and last week offered a perspective on 25 years.

"When we started out, our objective was to save a few of the special places for our great-grandchildren," Peirce said. "Now we've raised our sights: We want to save *many* of the special places for *their* great-grandchildren."